1: Herskovits E-4, 5 (1934) 1937 SV3 Haiti SV3
Mirebalais

INTRODUCTION

THE VALLEY OF MIREBALAIS

THE TRAVELER comes suddenly on the valley of Mirebalais, as the road from the capital turns the shoulder of a hill. Long and narrow, the plain stretches before him with its many tones of green. Ahead is the village from which the valley takes its name, its metal roofs aglow in the sunlight, or reflecting the gray sky of the rainy season. Here and there appears a yellow, muddy slash made by the Artibonite River, while framing the valley are the mountains, rising one behind another as they complete its encirclement.

This first glimpse of the country gives no hint of a numerous population. It is as though this valley, like so many other things in Haiti, had set out to belie its own reality and, in this impression, at the very outset to point the lesson that the observer must seek well beneath the surface if he is to attain any understanding of the country and its people. For just as the unsettled appearance of this Haitian valley conceals numerous habitations, cultivated fields, and hard-working inhabitants, so the frenzy of Haitian religious rites is but a gloss upon disciplined ceremonialism, and the relatively placid everyday existence of the Haitian peasant but a mask behind which is waged a spiritual conflict that is his heritage from the dual sources of his traditions.

The commune of Mirebalais is situated in the heart of central Haiti. Lying some thirty-five miles from Port-au-Prince,

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101 36 [491] both town and district are bisected by the main route between the capitals of the Haitian and the Dominican republics. Yet, once again, this geographical nearness but distorts the psychological distance between Mirebalais and the metropolis. For though the busses, converted from camions, pass [494] to and from the coastal city several times a week, the valley and even the town which is its center drowse in essential isolation. A few hundred yards off the main road find the Haitian peasant following the mode of life of his forebears, oblivious of events outside the valley. Only for a few of the *notables* of the town, the *gros nègres*, who have personal, political, or business contacts with Port-au-Prince, is the comparative proximity to the capital meaningful.

174 It is not possible to say how long this valley has been inhabited. Certainly the early Indians roamed there; and there, as in other parts of the island of Hispaniola, the tragedy of their extinction under the brutality of early Spanish rule must 175 have taken place. Moreau de St. Mery, to whom all students of 103 Haiti must acknowledge a debt of gratitude for his painstakingly accurate reports of life on the island, gives the derivation of its name.

> "Mirebalais received its name," he says, "because of the enormous numbers of wild animals the first Frenchmen found there, which recalled to them the small district in the region of Poitou [in France], called Mirebalais, where some of them had probably first seen the light of day. These quadrupeds, first introduced by the Spaniards, had no difficulty in multiplying there after the Indians had disappeared from their native land and the Spaniards, reduced in numbers, were obliged to abandon the great plains, so that horses, cattle, etc. came to exercise exclusive domain."[1]

175 St. Mery's work, which traces the development of Mirebalais as one of the pariahes of pre-Revolutionary Haiti, makes it

2: Courlander B-5 (1937-1955) 1960 SV3 Haiti SV3

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3. Country people carrying produce to market. The highways of Haiti's economic life are the mountain trails and the unpaved roads over which the produce of countless small gardens is carried in bundles and baskets.

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Courlander B-5 (1937-1988) 1960 SV3 Haiti SV3

rhythmically, to the accompaniment of drums, *catas*, or horns, while a singing leader composes topical songs in which the laborers join.

The tools which a rural Haitian chooses, and the way he uses them, often are in a West African tradition. He performs a multitude of tasks with his machete, or bush knife: weeding a garden, peeling an orange, cutting down a tree, making a drum or mortar, opening a coconut. It is an all-purpose tool, as it is in Africa. Until a few years ago it was supplemented by the extra-long, heavier, "double machete." The axe and the chisel are known and used too, but the machete is supreme. The hoe is the tool for tilling the soil, even in the flat country, and even though the Haitian has horses and cattle which could pull a plow. Horses are for riding and not for pulling. In carrying loads, the Haitian peasant still prefers the head to the shoulders. If he has a donkey, the donkey will carry for him. An old Haitian proverb goes: "Meçi Bondieu pou' bourrique là, si nous pas gainyain bourrique là faut Haitien po'té tout bagaille" (Thank God for the donkey, if we didn't have the donkey the Haitian would have to carry everything)." Generally speaking, the rough and rocky terrain of Haiti and inadequate secondary roads have done nothing to encourage the use of carts or wagons.

Corn is stored in the trees, as in West Africa, or in granaries built upon stilts, also as in West Africa. The Haitian makes his fire in the African fashion, with several long sticks or poles meeting point-to-point in the heart of the fire. As the ends are consumed, the sticks are pushed toward the center. Grain is pulverized in large wooden mortars, as in West Africa, and winnowed in a woven tray. Fish traps are sometimes woven in the traditional West African manner, and fishermen often set their nets in converging spirals and beat the water with sticks to drive the fish to the center. And on the rivers and lakes are to be seen dugout canoes of a kind familiar on the inland waters of West Africa.

The folklore of the fields contains many themes known to the West African. One old Haitian farmer, discussing the spiritual relationship of the planter to the earth, declared that a man must be strong and potent when he plants, else the crops will be vitiated and sickly. For this reason, he said, a man must not plant seeds the day after he has had sexual intercourse, because he has been temporarily drained of his life-giving powers.[9A]

The tale of the hoe that worked by itself in the fields is also widespread. It enters many animal and Bouki stories, and also is known in a form that is familiar in West Africa. In this story, there was once a man who owned a hoe which worked by itself whenever a magical formula was pronounced. It would stop working whenever the magical

9A [For footnote, see Category 116, P 352.-- Analyst]

3: Leyburn Z-4, 5 (no date) 1966
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Since it was an entrenched interest, however, no responsible statesman had dared to threaten its hold. The Marines swept it out of existence, undertaking to substitute for it a trained constabulary of only 2,000 men who should combine routine military tasks with police duty in the scattered towns. Results were immediately apparent: the weighty incubus of soldiers' wages was lifted from the treasury; thousands of men were deprived of sinecures and put back into productive economic activities; the constant threat of armed revolution was removed; better order was kept by 2,000 trained men in trim uniform than by twelve times that number of ragged loafers who called themselves soldiers; and since the army was no longer the great steppingstone to political office, the élite felt more secure from assault by ambitious but uneducated army men. From 1843 to 1915 the élite had endured many lower-caste presidents because these were able to control the army; now the army had disappeared.

The Marines did much that was of indisputable benefit to Haiti. This was acknowledged even by the most vocal patriots who soon began to campaign for an end of the Occupation. Where there had been no real work in public health, Americans now built hospitals, established clinics, cleaned up the sources of many diseases, laid down sewage systems, gave the towns pure water. In 1915 there were only three automobiles in the country, and no roads for them to travel; the Americans built many miles of paved roads. In 1915 there had been only one wharf, two short stretches of railroad, two lighthouses, one electric plant; the Americans undertook electrification, telephone systems, the construction of administration buildings, and other public conveniences. Whether in such visible matters or in the obscurer realms of currency, banking, and budgets hardly a phase of daily life was left untouched. And judged by the standards of civilization the Marines improved what they touched.

But rancor against the Americans began early and continued to the bitter end in 1934. The pride of all Haitians was deeply wounded by the Occupation. For 111 years they had governed themselves and had assumed themselves to be a sovereign nation; the Marines patroling the countryside were vivid reminders that Haiti had never been independent except by sufferance, and that white men were once more overseeing the destinies of colored and Negro men. Nevertheless, the reasons proclaimed for opposing the Occupation were not those of hurt vanity. Some of those given were entirely

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two rooms to house the whole family. "In these huts, filth and every species of uncleanliness prevail, for the people give themselves up to their indolent and lazy habits. It is common to see the pigs and poultry herding with the family."[19]

The furnishings in the huts were as simple as the construction. Rarely was there more than one bed, if that; the children of the family used mats for sleeping. A table, a stool, a couple of patched chairs, calabash bowls, an iron pot or two (and in later days, discarded gasoline tins), comprise the household equipment.

The fine roads of the French régime became rutted and washed, were overgrown with weeds, and soon reverted to wasteland or became nothing more than paths. Carriages ceased to be of any use, and there were few wagons; donkeys and horses became the regular means of transportation, and this was true until the Americans began to build roads again in 1916. The colonial régime had left a legacy of bridges, public buildings, parks, irrigation ditches; practically every improvement of this nature crumbled in slow decay and was not replaced. The temperate Dr. Brown closed his account of the Haiti of 1836 with the following paragraph:

> To sum up all that might be said upon the actual condition of Hayti, poverty and degradation stare one in the face wherever he goes—and the state of the whole island will be fully understood in the United States when it is bluntly asserted, that the country is one continuous negro village, built of mud cabins, and unfurnished with the usual comforts of life. The population is, with small exceptions, an indolent, naked multitude, without sustenance or a disposition to make exertions to obtain it; without enormous vices, but petty and insignificant in every thing relating to human character, and not many removes from the tribes upon the Niger in point of civilization. The fact is indisputable, that as a nation the blacks of Saint Domingo are in a retrograde movement as regards intellectual improvement, and no obstacle seems to exist to prevent this descent to barbarism. The government and institutions of the country must for the present remain unstable, and it is difficult to pronounce what the changes involved in the future will produce.[20]

Progress, as Westerners understand it, comes through contacts and competition, both of which were lacking to Haiti in large measure throughout the whole of the nineteenth century. While externally

19. Franklin, *op. cit.*, p. 396.
20. *Op. cit.*, II, 288–289.

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A revolution directed by a general of real ambition was likely to involve an appeal to foreign powers. Haiti being almost roadless, ships were important for moving troops and blockading seaports. Many a chieftain has purchased six or eight ships abroad, and with this "navy" won his fight. Financial intrigue was frequent. By borrowing money from France, Germany, or England, with the promise to reshape Haitian financial policy to the benefit of the creditor country, several revolutionaries have secured funds for arms and the necessary soldiers to effect a coup. Sooner or later also one might expect to see the Môle Saint Nicolas, which guards the Windward Passage pathway between Cuba and Haiti, come into the picture. Cession of the Mole has frequently been held out as bait for foreign support, but popular opposition to white ownership of any Haitian land has always stopped actual cession. When Haiti's debt to Germany was due, she borrowed from France to pay it, and then later borrowed from the United States to pay France. All such appeals to foreign powers have merely drawn attention to the defenseless position of the country; many a successful revolutionary chief has lived to regret his appeal for aid."[19]

The one time between 1804 and 1915 when political opinion was vocal and truly significant was in the latter years of Boyer's administration. Then it took pains to attack specific evils with steady persistence, even though the cures suggested were vague. Yet after the successful elimination of Boyer, politicians who had worked so brilliantly in the opposition showed themselves even more incapable. Political thought, at a low ebb for the next forty years, revived only when, after 1883, the Liberals were eliminated from politics. Their complete defeat seems to have given élite thinkers time for sober reflection upon the plight of their country. Before 1843 the critics had been in a position to make their words effective; after 1883 they wrote—soberly, brilliantly, persuasively—but their books and pamphlets were read only by a small group of fellow aristocrats who already thought as they did, or disagreed with them in print. Political homilies made no impression upon the minds of the peasants left uneducated by all the élite presidents of Haiti.

In the crucial days of the American Occupation, once again political debate rose to brilliant heights. The rude shock of seeing foreign

19. See, on this whole subject of Haiti's foreign relations, an excellent chapter in Montague, *op. cit.*, chap. IX.

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be given to Haiti for vast rubber plantings.[21] Opposition to Lescot comes chiefly from those who consider him too friendly with the Dominicans who killed hundreds of Haitian workers in 1937, Lescot having figured prominently in negotiations that led to the Dominican government's agreement to pay indemnities to Haiti for the slaughter.

Reviewing the whole course of Haitian history, the field of politics seems to have marshaled itself behind a few regularities. In every case there have been voices raised to protest, yet the ruling clique, whatever its grouping, has effectively supported these characteristic political customs:

1. Complete dominance of political life by the president. Strong men seem to be necessary to rule ignorant masses. Even the revolutions precipitated by parties campaigning for parliamentarianism have, when successful, become governments by the president. This concentration of power in one man's hands makes the next revolution possible, for it is easier to overthrow one man than to eliminate a party based upon wide suffrage and diffused responsibility.

2. The inferior position of cabinet ministers. These have resembled neither European nor American secretaries of state in their responsibilities, but have been little more than clerks appointed by the president to serve as heads of a bureau. The treasurer-general, for example, during most of Haiti's history has merely received the moneys, while the president disbursed them. The secretary-general has neither originated nor conducted the details of public policy. Often as not, the minister has made a convenient whipping boy when the president has got himself involved in internal or foreign complications: by demanding the minister's resignation the president remained unscathed.

3. The unimportance of the legislature. It has made useful patron-

21. The European War, threatening the supply of rubber coming to the United States from British Malaya and the Netherlands East Indies, has made the American government seek new sources. The Department of Agriculture established an experimental station and breeding gardens for rubber plants in Haiti, and the results were so successful that extensive areas were planted with rubber trees. Haiti and the United States in May, 1941, reached a long-term agreement for "the development of agriculture and economy"; the projects embraced under the agreement include not only rubber but the further development of Haiti's banana plantations, the planting of oil crops, drug plants, spices, fiber plants, the stimulation of handicraft industries, and the development of forestry resources peculiar to the tropics. A further extension of an additional $500,000 in credits will be made for use on highways, irrigation projects, and to provide transportation facilities for the areas to be planted to rubber trees.

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policy of encouraging trade with his friends and prohibiting it with his enemies—both arbitrarily. The variation of Pétion was a sort of mercantilism, with set high tariffs.

What Dessalines planned was in terms of Western statecraft so weird that white onlookers felt they were restrained in calling Dessalines a transplanted African tribal chieftain. So passionately intense was the fury of that general against all whites that he took every precaution he could devise to prevent face-to-face dealings between his Haitians and foreigners. By deceit, treachery, and ingenious cruelty he conducted a massacre which deserves comparison with that of Saint Bartholomew: this effectively rid the country of white residents. Since for a time Haiti would have to depend for economic survival upon trade with foreigners, Dessalines next conceived a project whereby the whole population would be gathered in the centre of the island, in the most protected valleys and the gorges of the highest mountains. In these fastnesses the people would never see a white but would work on the land, producing sugar and coffee and cotton for export without ever leaving their local habitations. On the seacoast would be established certain "counters" over which a few incorruptible Haitians, chosen by the Emperor himself, would sell local products and buy the necessary imported goods. Impregnable fortresses were to guard access to the interior,[a] which would be reached by new roads from the seacoast "counters." Every seaport was to be destroyed as soon as new towns could be built in the back country. Already when his death intervened Dessalines had moved his capital from the Cape (that is, Cap-Haïtien, formerly Cap Français) to the inland village of Marchand (in the department of the Artibonite; now renamed Dessalines), and his next plan was to transfer Port-au-Prince eight leagues inland to the plantation Dérance, among the mountains.

Dessalines has been thought absurd, childish, barbaric. But there is something poignant, even tragic, in this fiery determination of the black chieftain, bitter over the cruelties and indignity to which his people had been subject for decades, to use this alien island as best he could and preserve his people at any cost from such another domination.

Despite his scheme for ultimate isolation of the people, Dessalines kept everyone steadily at work by the forced-labor system instituted

a. See p. 247 and note 13. under Toussaint.

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not find herself constantly embroiled with European states and American financial interests. The Haitian debt was funded, and a financial adviser remained in the country even after the Occupation came to an end. It is expected that by 1943 the last debt will be paid; the financial adviser, however, withdrew in 1941. Since the Occupation, although the republic has been free to manage her own affairs, she has consulted frequently with the State Department in Washington.

Nineteen years of occupation ended the century of Haitian isolation. The Americans built roads, conducted health campaigns, made their presence felt even in remote hamlets and valleys. American authors, political, romantic, and sensational, discovered the Antillean republic. Steamship companies stopped their cruises for a few hours at Cap-Haïtien to allow tourists to visit the Citadel, and at Port-au-Prince to see the sights of the capital. Every Haitian now realizes that there is a world outside.

Whatever crises have arisen in Haitian affairs, certain problems have persisted. For whom do they constitute a source of worry? Since the government has always been a dictatorship, limited or absolute, subject to no party control, the incumbents of office have never had the experience of being constantly reminded by their opponents of the misery or daily worries of the population. After a hundred years the people have learned that relief is not to be expected from politicians. Occasionally a dramatic revolutionary leader has persuaded some of the people that the officials in power were responsible for their distress, and so worked up a following; yet even when such movements succeeded, the masses never benefited. To most governments of the past century Haiti's problem has been only one: to frustrate insurrection. There is evidence that recent administrations have busied themselves assiduously with the country's internal problems, although none of them has been adequately solved. The élite, at least as a group, do not feel any apparent responsibility for the maladjustments, nor obligation to effect the necessary reforms. A few patriots, and those almost without exception not in office, know what ails the country and say so; a smaller number propose reasonable solutions. The problems remain. Of these the three outstanding are overpopulation with all its accompanying ills, health, and education.

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712 the battlements far off across the tortuous mass of mountains and
[713] green valleys, admire the sheer strength of will which made His Majesty's subjects bear four hundred cannon up the steep and rocky path—not to mention thousands of cannon balls now rusting away after a century of disuse, or the powder and shot which once filled
[173] the magazines. It is said that five thousand soldiers could be housed in the fortress at once. If this is hyperbole, one hardly dare challenge
[703] it, for the whole Citadel belittles the individual man. It is likewise said that Christophe once made a battalion of soldiers march off the cliff to their death merely to demonstrate his absolute control over
[766] them. Such stories grow up around His Black Majesty. He lies entombed in his useless but still superb fortress—and lives in the memory of the Northerners, one of whom said proudly: "We of the North have a great heritage, and you will find that we are all dominated by *une psychologie citadelienne*."

Dungeons, secret passages, royal apartments, separate rooms for each of the old Dutch, Spanish, French, and English cannon, some of them dating back to the seventeenth century—all the paraphernalia of the storybook fortress is present. From a bastion one gazes, as from an alp, for miles in any direction, and feels that La Ferrière is certainly one of the most impressive, and one of the most futile, edifices in the world. If the silent cannon had ever been fired, their balls would have rumbled harmlessly down the mountainside. The suspicion grows that Christophe achieved his architectural miracle not primarily as a defense against the French, but to make his subjects proud of what a nation of despised ex-slaves could accomplish.

344 Five miles away, at the foot of the mountain, is the village of
644 Milot, with the ruins of the palace of Sans Souci. Of yellow stone, it spreads out spaciously like a French château. Its rooms must have been magnificent. The palace is so situated that one may look out across the northern plains to the sea, or up the valleys to mountain peaks. In Sans Souci Christophe shot himself in 1820 when he knew that only *souci* would remain to him if he lived.

489 Transportation from one part of the country to another is far from
[496] easy. There are no railroads—unless one counts the short line running north a few miles from Port-au-Prince to nowhere in particular, and the equally short line coming west into Cap-Haïtien from the fields
[491] of the northern plain. Roads built by the American Marines make automobile travel between the main towns possible, if one does not

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mind dust, ruts, and a steady succession of bumps. To travel in the average hired car, driven by a Haitian, is one of the grim experiences of life. The driver speeds as if pursued by a demon, while the peasant pedestrians leap for safety into the ditches; the unfortunate passenger is moved to close his eyes to avoid seeing the inevitable crash which does not come. The most comfortable means of travel if one is going only to towns is by ship, for practically all of Haiti's towns are seaports.

To know the towns is still not to know Haiti, however, for two million or more Haitians live in the rural regions. These are the people. And if they are ignorant and not too clean, they are nevertheless models of kindly generosity. It is the proud boast even of the élite that one may travel the length and breadth of the land in perfect safety, in no danger of life or of personal property.

Many homely sights linger in the mind: women washing the family clothes in the stream, laughing and gossiping with their neighbors; men and women talking in animated fashion to themselves, arguing, cajoling, explaining as they walk along; individuals carrying a single flower, simply because it is beautiful; barefoot women, gnarled of hand and lined of face, kneeling in the Catholic church at prayer; taxi drivers who cruise by, hissing in order to attract the attention of a visitor who obviously can afford to ride instead of walk; an apparently ceaseless procession of patient donkeys, always laden, sometimes ridden by women, sometimes urged along from behind; the so-called buses each with its witty or its florid name (Plaisance, Éclair, Grâce-à-Dieu, Polichinelle, Sauve-qui-peut, Montparnasse), which like glorified buckboards jostle woodenly from the town to country hamlets; the winsome, open smile and gay laughter of a peasant boy; the ingratiating charm of a sleeping baby in the noise of the market place. To know the average Haitian is to feel a warm affection for him. His life is never easy, yet he bears it all with true beauty of spirit. If *le bon Dieu* sends distress, he will also make it possible for distress to be borne.

The people are polite, whether to each other or to strangers. A younger person greets an older one as *compère* or *commère*—literally, godfather or godmother; to his equal he says "*frère*" or "*m'sieu.*" Sometimes one sees a local patriarch instructing little children in "deportment." This courtesy extends to hospitality: a stranger is almost sure to be offered shelter and food wherever he stops.